

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

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CINCPAC HONOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 23913

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJ: POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAPHAT'S ATTEMPTED RETURN
TO THAILAND

SUMMARY: IN ITS HANDLING OF THE CRISIS PROVOKED BY THE UN-
EXPECTED AND CLANDESTINE RETURN OF FIELD MARSHAL PROAPHAT
CHARUSATHIAN TO THAILAND THE SENI GOVERNMENT HANDLED A
DIFFICULT AND COMPLEX SITUATION WITH CONSIDERABLE CARE AND
CAUTION. CRITICIZED BY SOME OBSERVERS FOR ITS SLOWNESS AND
INEFFICIENCY, THE SENI GOVERNMENT NEVERTHELESS ACCOMPLISHED
ITS PURPOSE OF PERSUADING PRAPHAT TO RETURN TO TAIWAN OF
HIS OWN VOLITION. PRIME MINISTER SENI FIRST DEVELOPED A
CONSENSUS AMONG THE MILITARY, POLICE, AND PARLIAMENTARY LEADERS
THAT PRAPHAT WOULD HAVE TO LEAVE AND THEN OBTAINED PRAPHAT'S
AGREEMENT TO DEPART THROUGH THE TIMELY INTERVENTION OF
THE KING, WHOSE VIEWS THE FORMER DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER COULD
NOT IGNORE. IT IS PROBABLY TRUE TO SAY THAT PRIME MINISTER
SENI WAS SEEN THROUGHOUT THE AFFAIR AS REACTING TO A CRISIS
RATHER THAN PROVIDING DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP. HOW MUCH IMPACT
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THE AFFAIR WILL HAVE ON THE STABILITY OF THE SENI GOVERN-
MENT WILL PROBABLY NOT BECOME APPARENT FOR SOME TIME. ONE

INDICATOR MAY BE THE FINAL DISPOSITION OF THE BUDGET BILL BEFORE PARLIAMENT WHICH PASSED ITS FIRST READING ON AUGUST 5 BY THE LOPSIDED MARGIN OF 220-54. VOTE ON THE SECOND READING IS NOT EXPECTED TILL THE MIDDLE OF SEPTEMBER. BY THEN THE CROWDED EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEK MAY HAVE FADED INTO THE PAST, LEAVING FEW TRACES ON THE ONGOING POLITICAL SITUATION. AS OF NOW MOST OBSERVERS EXPECT THE BUDGET TO PASS WITHOUT SERIOUS TROUBLE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE CROWDED EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEK, DOMINATED BY FIELD MARSHAL PRAPHAT CHARUSATHIAN'S RETURN TO THAILAND AND DEPARTURE FOR TAIWAN, HAVE BEGUN TO FALL INTO PERSPECTIVE. ALTHOUGH TAKEN BY SURPRISE BY PRAPHAT'S RETURN, PRIME MINISTER SENI HANDLED THE CRISIS FAIRLY EFFECTIVELY, ACCOMPLISHING PRAPHAT'S DEPARTURE WITH THE AGREEMENT OF THE FORMER DEPTUY PRIME MINISTER. SENI FIRST DEVELOPED A CONSENSUS AMONG MILITARY, POLICE, AND PARLIAMENTARY LEADERS THAT PRAPHAT WOULD HAVE TO LEAVE AND THEN OBTAINED PRAPHAT'S AGREEMENT TO DEPART THROUGH THE TIMELY INTERVENTION OF THE KING, WHOSE VIEWS THE FORMER DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER COULD NOT IGNORE.

2. SENI MOVED SLOWLY AND DELIBERATELY IN HANDLING THE POLITICAL CRISIS RESULTING FROM PRAPHAT'S RETURN. IN PART THIS A CONSEQUENCE OF SENI'S DELIBERATE APPROACH TO ANY ISSUE, BUT IN PART IT REFLECTED HIS SENSE OF THE LIMITS TO HIS AUTHORITY. HE PRESIDES OVER A FOUR-PARTY COALITION COMMANDING A POTENTIAL OF 206 OUT OF 279 SEATS IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. PARTY DISCIPLINE IS NOT AS STRONG AS IT MIGHT BE, HOWEVER, AND AT ONE TIME DURING THE PAST WEEK SENI FACED A THREAT FROM SOME 50 OF THE 114 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY (HIS OWN PARTY) TO WITHHOLD SUPPORT FROM HIM UNLESS HE QUICKLY ACCOMPLISHED PRAPHAT'S DEPARTURE. HAD THE CRISIS BEEN PROLONGED, THE STABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT COULD WELL HAVE BEEN DAGEROUSLY WEAKENED.

3. ACCORDINGLY, SENI CAREFULLY MANIPULATED THE VARIOUS BODIES COMPETING IN THE THAI POLITICAL ARENA--THE MILITARY
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AND CIVILIAN BUREAUCRACIES, STUDENT ACTIVISTS, PARLIAMENT, AND THE KING, ALL OF WHICH HAD THEIR OWN VIEWS AND SOMETIMES COMPETING OBJECTIVES. ALTHOUGH AT TIME APPEARING TO BE VACILLATING AND INDECISIVE, SENI PLAYED FOR TIME AS HE OBTAINED THE SUPPORT OF THE MILITARY CHIEFS AND, AS PRESURE BEGAN TO BUILD UP, BROAD SUPPORT FROM THE GOVERNMENT PARTIES AND PARLIAMENT IN GENERAL. SENI THUS MANAGED TO PUT PRAPHAT'S SUPPORTERS ON THE DEFENSIVE.

4. THERE WAS NO REAL VICTORY FOR THE GOVERNMENT OR ANY

SERIOUS DEFEAT FOR PRAPHAT'S SUPPORTERS, WHO WERE TO BE FOUND BOTH WITHIN THE THAI MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT AND, TO SOME EXTENT, WITHIN THE CABINET ITSELF. FOR EXAMPLE, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF HEALTH THAWI CHUNLASAP (HIMSELF A RETIRED AIR CHIEF MARSHAL AND A MAJOR FIGURE IN THE PREVIOUS MILITARY-DOMINATED GOVERNMENTS) TOLD THE AMBASSADOR AUGUST 23 THAT THERE WAS NO CHARGE OUTSTANDING AGAINST PRAPHAT AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD NOT POWER TO DEPORT A THAI CITIZEN. HE DESCRIBED PRAPHAT'S DEPARTURE AS HIS OWN DECISION, FOLLOWING CONVERSATIONS WITH THE KING AND WITH PRAPHAT'S OWN FRIENDS.

5. THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR DEMONSTRATED SENI'S WISDOM IN HAVING SUBSTANTIAL REPRESENTATION OF CONSERVATIVE ELEMENTS IN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION, FOR WITHOUT THEM THE GOVERNMENT MIGHT HAVE HAD A MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TIME IN MANAGING THE CRISIS. MOST OF THE NEGOTIATORS SENT BY THE GOVERNMENT TO DEAL WITH PRAPHAT WERE EX-MILITARY MEN AND EVEN FORMER ASSOCIATES OF PRAPHAT. OF THE FIVE CABINET MINISTERS DESIGNATED TO NEGOTIATE WITH PRAPHAT ON AUGUST 19 AND TO MAKE HIM UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION ARISING FROM HIS RETURN TO THAILAND, ALL WERE EX-MILITARY MEN AND POLITICAL CONSERVATIVES.

6. THE EPISODE WILL PROBABLY SERVE TO DISCOURAGE OTHER POLITICAL EXILES FROM ATTEMPTING TO RETURN TO THAILAND AT THIS TIME. HAD PRAPHAT BEEN ALLOWED TO STAY, IT IS LIKELY THAT EX-PRIME MINISTER THANOM KITTIKHACHON AND HIS SON NARONG WOULD EVENTUALLY HAVE SOUGHT TO RETURN AS WELL. THE RESULTANT DISRUPTION AND TURMOIL MIGHT HAVE HAD SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STABILITY OF DEMOCRATIC
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GOVERNMENT IN THAILAND.

7. THE PRAPHAT EPISODE ALSO DEMONSTRATED THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF THE KING IN THE THAI POLITICAL SYSTEM. HE REMAINS AN IMPORTANT STABILIZING INFLUENCE AND A COURT OF LAST APPEAL WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS. THE KING'S CONCERN OVER THE UNREST CAUSED BY PRAPHAT'S RETURN AND HIS APPARENT SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO GET PRAPHAT OUT OF THE COUNTRY PROBABLY PLAYED A DECISIVE ROLE IN FORCING PRAPHAT AND HIS SUPPORTERS TO BACK DOWN.

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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8. PRAPHAT'S RETURN WAS, ON THE WHOLE, A BOON TO LEFT-WING STUDENT ACTIVISTS, WHO HAVE NOT HAD A GOOD CAUSE TO PRESENT TO THE PUBLIC SINCE THE MARCH NEGOTIATIONS OVER THE U.S. TROOP PRESENCE. THE NATIONAL STUDENT CENTER OF THAILAND AND THE ANTI-DICTATORSHIP FRONT SPONSORED RALLIES AT THE SANAM LUANG IN BANGKOK, DRAWING CROWDS ESTIMATED AT 15,00 AND 20,000. THIS WAS A FAR CRY FROM THE HUGE RALLIES WHICH STUDENT ACTIVISTS DREW AT THE TIME OF THE OVERTHROW OF THE THANOM GOVERNMENT IN 1973 OR AT THE TIME OF THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT IN MAY, 1975, BUT IT WAS AN INDICATION THAT THE STUDENTS WERE WORKING ON AN ISSUE WHERE THEY POTENTIALLY COULD MOBILIZE SUBSTANTIAL SUPPORT. THE VIOLENCE THAT OCCURRED AT THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY ON AUGUST 21 WAS A WARNING OF WHAT COULD HAPPEN IF THE CRISIS WERE PROLONGED. IT PROBABLY ACCELERATED SENI'S EFFORTS TO PERSUADE PRAPHAT TO LEAVE. THE GOVERNMENT HAD ANNOUNCED AUGUST 20 THAT PRAPHAT WOULD BE ALLOWED TO STAY UNTIL AUGUST 26. PRAPHAT WAS FINALLY PREVAILED ON TO LEAVE AUGUST 22 IN A GOVERNMENT CHARTERED AIRCRAFT. THE VIOLENCE, IN GENERAL, WAS NOT BLAMED ON THE SENI GOVERNMENT, BUT WAS
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A RESULT OF LONG-STANDING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEFT-WING

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND RIGHT-WING VOCATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS. THE RECTOR OF THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY, DR. PUAI UNGPHAKON, NOTED ON TV THE EVENING OF AUGUST 20 THAT THE CRISIS "WAS NOT A CASE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ASKING PRAPHAT TO COME HER". THIS VIEW WAS EVIDENTLY WIDELY HELD.

9. THE STUDENT ACTIVISTS ALSO HAD RELATIVELY GREATER SUCCESS IN OBTAINING LABOR SUPPORT FOR THEIR EFFORTS TO FORCE PRAPHAT TO LEAVE THAN ON PREVIOUS ISSUES. THE THAI LABOR COUNCIL HAD EXTENDED DISCUSSIONS WITH THE STUDENT-ACTIVISTS BUT DID NOT REACH THE POINT OF TAKING ANY STRIKE ACTION. HOWEVER, ON AUGUST 20 IT THREATENED ACTION THE FOLLOWING WEEK, EVIDENTLY FEARING THAT PRAPHAT'S RETURN MEANT THAT A MILITARY COUP D'ETAT WAS IMMINENT. A MILITARY COUP WAS PROBABLY NEVER A SERIOUS POSSIBILITY, AS PRIME MINISTER SENI OBTAINED THE SUPPORT OF THE MILITARY HIGH COMMAND FOR HIS EFFORTS TO PERSUADE PRAPHAT TO DEPART. HAD THESE EFFORTS NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL, HOWEVER, AND HAD PRAPHAT REMAINED, STUDENT-ACTIVIST COLLABORATION WITH THE TRADE UNIONS MIGHT HAVE EXPANDED SUBSTANTIALLY.

10. MEDIA TREATMENT OF THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR WAS EXTENSIVE, WITH MOST EDITORIALS ACCEPTING THE NEED FOR PRAPHAT TO RETURN TO EXILE IN ORDER TO RE-ESTABLISH DOMESTIC PEACE AND HARMONY. THE THAI LANGUAGE PRESS REFLECTED A VARIETY OF VIEWPOINTS DURING PRAPHAT'S STAY, BUT ALL OF THE LARGE AND MEDIUM CIRCULATION DAILIES WERE EITHER CRITICAL OF PRAPHAT'S CONTINUED PRESENCE, OR MAINTAINED A NEUTRAL STANCE. NONE OPENLY SUPPORTED PRAPHAT, ALTHOUGH SMALL CIRCULATION CONSERVATIVE PAPERS FAVORED ALLOWING PRAPHAT TO STAY AND FIGHT HIS CASE IN COURT. THE GOVERNMENT WAS CRITICIZED BY MOST PAPERS FOR BEING WEAK AND INDECISIVE, AND IS STILL BEING CRITICIZED FOR ITS INABILITY TO CONTROL THE MILITARY. THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PAPERS, ALL SMALL CIRCULATION AND WITH A LIMITED THOUGH INFLUENTIAL THAI READERSHIP, WERE GENERALLY MODERATE IN THEIR EDITORIAL COMMENTS, ALTHOUGH THERE WAS SOME LIVELY CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT AND OF PRAPHAT AND HIS SUPPORTERS IN THE NATION. THERE WERE VERY FEW EDITORIAL COMMENTS IN CHINESE PAPERS, WHICH USUALLY REFRAIN FROM COMMENTING ON DOMESTIC ISSUES

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THAT DO NOT AFFECT THE CHINESE COMMUNITY.

11. PUBLIC OPINION AS OBSERVED BY THE EMBASSY ENCOMPASSED A WIDE VARIETY OF VIEWS. WHILE MOST PEOPLE SEEMED TO AGREE THAT IT WAS UNFORTUNATE THAT PRAPHAT HAD RETURNED AT ALL, THERE WAS NO CONSENSUS FOR ANY SINGLE LINE OF ACTION TO DEAL WITH THE CRISIS. MANY SIMPLY WANTED HIM DEPORTED (THOUGH THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN UNCONSTITUTIONAL),

WHILE OTHERS WANTED HIM ARRESTED AND TRIED FOR HIS PART IN ATTEMPTING TO SUPPRESS THE UPRISING OF OCTOBER, 1973, WHICH LED TO HIS OWN DOWNFALL AND THAT OF THE THANOM GOVERNMENT. REGARDLESS OF INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS ABOUT PRAPHAT (AND FEW AMONG THE GENERAL PUBLIC SEEMED TO THINK HIGHLY OF HIM), NEARLY ALL OF THOSE EXPRESSING OPINIONS APPEARED RELIEVED THAT HE AGREED TO RETURN TO TAIWAN.

12. REPERCUSSIONS OF THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR WILL PROBABLY BE HEARD FOR SOME TIME TO COME. THE BANGKOK PRESS AUGUST 25 QUOTES MINISTER OF DEFENSE THAWIT SENIWONG AS THREATENING TO RESIGN HIS PORTFOLIO BECAUSE OF ACCUSATIONS BY DEMOCRAT PARTY MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT THAT HE HAD "SHIELDED" PRAPHAT, HAD BEEN "INEFFECTIVE" IN DEALING WITH THE CRISIS, AND WAS MINISTER OF DEFENSE IN NAME ONLY. HE WAS ALLEGED TO HAVE REMARKED AT ONE POINT LAST WEEK THAT HE WOULD PREFER TO QUIT HIS JOB RATHER THAN TAKE ACTION TO ORDER PRAPHAT OUT OF THE COUNTRY, BECAUSE PRAPHAT WAS HIS ONE-TIME BOSS.

13. CRITICISM OF GENERAL THAWIT PROBABLY HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH HIS HANDLING OF THE MILITARY DURING PRAPHAT'S STAY. IT IS MORE CLEARLY AN ATTEMPT BY THE YOUNGER, LIBERAL FACTION OF THE DEMOCRAT PARTY, USING THE PRAPHAT INCIDENT AS AN EXCUSE, TO WEAKEN THE CONSERVATIVES IN THE PARTY, OF WHOM THAWIT IS ONE OF THE MORE OUTSPOKEN. MOST OF THE ACCUSATIONS MADE AGAINST THAWIT, I.E., HE WAS WEAK AND UNABLE TO EXERCISE AUTHORITY OVER THE MILITARY, WERE A RESULT OF THE THAI BUREAUCRAT: STRUCTURE AND OF THE THAI CONSTITUTION, RATHER THAN A FAILING ON THAWIT'S PART. THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE, (AND EVEN THE PRIME MINISTER HIMSELF), CANNOT GIVE A DIRECT ORDER TO MILITARY UNIT COMMANDERS. HE MUST PASS ANY REQUESTS TO THE SUPREME COMMANDER.

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MANDERS AND THE SERVICE CHIEFS, WHO ARE THEN RESPONSIBLE FOR SEEING THAT THEY ARE CARRIED OUT. THE SUPREME COMMANDER AND THE SERVICE CHIEFS INITIALLY HESITATED TO TAKE A POSITION ON THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR BUT ULTIMATELY SUPPORTED THE GOVERNMENT, AS NOTED ABOVE.

14. ON PAPER, TWO OFFICIAL INVESTIGATIONS ARE UNDER WAY TO EXAMINE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR. NEITHER IS EXPECTED TO LEAD TO MUCH, AS A THOROUGH INVESTIGATION AND RESULTING CONTROVERSY COULD THREATEN THE STABILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT. POLICE DIRECTOR-GENERAL SISUK MAHINTHARATHEIP APPOINTED A SIX-MAN POLICE INVESTIGATING COMMITTEE ON AUGUST 19 TO INVESTIGATE CHARGES BROUGHT AGAINST PRAPHAT, THANOM, AND NARONG ARISING OUT OF THE OCTOBER, 1973, OVERTHROW OF THE THANOM GOVERNMENT. ON AUGUST 22 SENI

GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED THAT THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER, NITHIPAT CHALICHAN, HAD BEEN APPOINTED TO HEAD A COMMITTEE TO INQUIRE INTO THE MANNER IN WHICH PRAPHAT ENTERED THE COUNTRY ON AUGUST 15.

15. HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT THE PRAPHAT AFFAIR HAD ON THE STABILITY OF THE SENI GOVERNMENT AND ITS PROSPECTS FOR REMAINING IN OFFICE WILL PROBABLY NOT BECOME APPARENT FOR SOME TIME. THE BUDGET FOR THAI FY1977 IS CURRENTLY IN THE COMMITTEE STAGE IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. IT PASSED ITS FIRST READING ON AUGUST 5 BY THE OVERWHELMING VOTE OF 220 TO 54, AND THE VOTE ON THE SECOND READING IS NOT EXPECTED UNTIL THE LATTER PART OF SEPTEMBER. BY THAT TIME THE EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEK MAY WELL HAVE FADED INTO THE PAST, LEAVING FEW TRACES ON THE ONGOING POLITICAL SITUATION. MOST OBSERVERS EXPECT THE BUDGET TO PASS WITHOUT SERIOUS TROUBLE.

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